



Connecting the Drops

Transcript: Ski Resorts See Climate Impacts

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A recent study found that a changing climate could cut the length of ski season in half in some parts of the US by 2050, and more by the end of the century. This could have significant impacts on Colorado's ski industry, which generates almost \$5 billion annually and creates more than 46,000 jobs. KDNK's Amy Hadden Marsh takes a look at two resorts on Colorado's West Slope to find out what they're doing to protect the snow and the bottom line.

[Sunlight Mountain Resort](#), near Glenwood Springs, opened early this season ... on November 23. 2017 was a different story. Opening Day was December 21, the latest start of ski season since 1985. 2017 was also the third driest year on record in Colorado and snowpack state-wide was the lowest in three decades. At Sunlight, natural snowfall was down by half that year, and it was too warm to make much snow. Visits were down 25 percent.

Sunlight is a small resort, with 680 acres of skiable terrain and a million-dollar annual budget. It caters mostly to locals, with an average of 80,000 to 100,000 skier visits per year.

Troy Hawks, Sunlight's Marketing Director, says 2017 was interesting but not the first time the state has had a dry winter.

"When we talk to the old timers of this valley, they said the last time they saw a snow year like last year was in the '78/'79 season as I understand it, so it's not that Colorado hasn't experienced poor snow seasons before last year."

He added that the year before, which would have been the 2016/17 season, was a record year for Sunlight.

But, Colorado winters have become variable enough for Sunlight to take precautionary measures, such as purchasing new, more efficient snowmaking guns and building two new snowmaking ponds.

Cameron Wobus, a senior scientist at [Lynker Technologies](#), a water and environmental resources consultant group in Boulder, says that's one thing ski resorts need to be doing: adapting to climate change.

"What ski resorts can do is they can make their snowmaking more efficient. One adaptation that is being implemented in various places around the world is 'downloading'. So basically

having a gondola that can get people to the middle of the mountain where there might be more snow and then you just ski the top half of the mountain.”

Wobus worked on a 2017 [study](#) about projected climate change impacts on skiing and snowmobiling in the U.S. He said the goal of the study was to understand the difference between what happens if we start mitigating carbon emissions and what happens if we don't.

“The higher resorts—Arapahoe Basin sticks out because it's the highest resort in the state of Colorado—might have reductions, you know, 10-20 percent change in season length under the worst scenario. Some of the lower resorts have much more significant change in season length.”

But, ski resorts statewide are already experiencing fewer visitors, particularly in the early part of ski season. The 23 resorts that are members of the trade group Colorado Ski Country USA reported an average of 8 percent fewer skier visits in December 2016 than the previous season. December 2017 visits were 13 percent down from that. Vail Resorts reported a 13 percent decline in skier visits for December 2016 and an additional 11 percent decline in 2017.

Skiing as a sport has a small carbon footprint. But, Wobus says the industry could suffer significant impacts from shorter winters, and needs to take more of a stand against climate change.

“What some resorts have been doing, particularly Aspen, I'll point out, (is) using their customer base and their position in the industry to really take a leadership role in getting people to think about climate change.”

“This isn't about your carbon footprint or mine. We now know we have a global problem and we have to respond to it at global scale.”

Auden Schendler runs the sustainability program for Aspen Skiing Company and sits on the Basalt Town Council.

“So you could argue (that) the big, powerful organizations who have access to wealth and influence are the exact organizations that ought to be pushing hard on climate...and that's what we're doing.”

With 5,000 acres of skiable terrain, 1.4 million annual skier visits, and 4,000 employees, Aspen Ski Co, as it's known locally, is considerably larger than Sunlight Mountain Resort. Schendler said that in the face of a changing climate Aspen Ski Co. has improved infrastructure and expanded geographically, by offering the Ikon ski pass that includes other resorts.

“But to me, that's just business. The issue is how do we reduce the impact of this problem for everybody so that maybe you retain some level of skiing down the line? But more importantly, that you do what you have the power to do as a ski resort which is maybe influence a social movement and reduce the damage.”

Schendler adds that Aspen Ski Co has been involved with state environmental and energy policy issues for over a decade.

Back at Sunlight, Troy Hawks says their climate policy focuses on conservation, education, and maintaining a small footprint.

"We are not overbuilt. We are not a mega-resort. We've got three small chairlifts. We've got a small bed and breakfast with about 19 rooms and that really sums up the size of our resort."

Aspen Ski Co's resources allow the company to take bigger steps than smaller resorts. But, Schendler says it's too late to compare the actions of larger resorts to those of small resorts.

"We have 10 years to essentially rewire the global economy so that it's carbon-free, so the question of the day should not be, 'Hey you're big, that one's small, their carbon footprint's less.' The question is: What's the biggest leverage you have access to and are you using it to drive change?"

Despite his study's warnings, ski industry consultant Cameron Wobus says skiing is not going away.

"Depending on where you are, ski resorts might be starting to see really short ski seasons if we don't do anything to mitigate carbon emissions. But, skiing is not over. There will always be places where you can get high enough to find snow and fortunately, for those of us in Colorado, many of those places are in our state."